

Dennae Pierre has been selected as the 2016 Phoenix North First Things First Champion for Young Children.

The award is given to local champions who actively volunteer their time to raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Champions spend a significant amount of time volunteering with FTF and building public awareness about the importance of early childhood issues.

Dennae Pierre engaged in awareness-raising efforts such as:

- Organizing an early childhood-awareness building activity.
- Providing a third party validation statement.
- Bringing 20 faith leaders from across Maricopa County to tour a Quality First center.
- Getting trained in basic FTF messaging.
- Inviting FTF to co-facilitate an early childhood training with the children's ministry of a multi-congregational church.



We recently caught up with Pierre, who is the Executive Director of The Surge Network, a collaborative of local churches who partner to equip leaders in their congregations to serve and bless their cities. As the founder of Foster Care Initiatives, Pierre has addressed Arizona's child welfare crisis and serves on the Governor's Council on Child Safety and Family Empowerment.

Question: Why do you feel early childhood development and health is so important?

Answer: The Christian community has always prioritized children, especially vulnerable children. Jesus Christ protested when the religious leaders of his day dismissed children from his presence. He gathered the children around him and publicly placed value on them. There is a beauty and innocence in children that is life-giving to our society. There is much we can learn from children about hope, faith, dependency, vulnerability, simplicity, and joy. Early childhood is a vulnerable time that can be used to nurture, protect, and value the humanity and dignity within children.

Q: What caused you to get involved in efforts to increase public awareness in early childhood issues?

A: In today's polarized climate, there is a lot of division. Children are something we can all delight in. The faces, smiles, tears and stories of children who've experienced neglect and abuse are the reasons I raise public awareness of early childhood issues. We must provide nurturing, healing environments so they can grow into adults who shape a better future for us all.

Q: Why do you feel building awareness in early childhood and developmental health is so important for families and communities?

A: The lack of awareness and investment in early childhood harms vulnerable children in our community. When children experience neglect and abuse it is never for one isolated reason. We live in an ecosystem where everyone is affected by one another. Humanity is created to love, nurture, and

protect their children. When that goes terribly wrong and a parent abuses or neglects a child, it is almost always because they grew up in environments full of dysfunction, pain, and trauma.

It doesn't stop at individual families; humanity was created to flourish in community. Neighbors, teachers and friends should notice when a child is not being loved and cared for. Cycles of abuse and neglect repeat and spread like wildfire because of isolation, a pace of life that is too fast and little space to know one another deeply. Families and communities who prioritize early childhood development are committed to not just prevent children from being wounded, but to go above and beyond to ensure every child receives the best their community has to offer to nourish their bodies, brains, personalities, imaginations, and spirit.

Q: How have you seen awareness for the early years change in your community?

A: In the last three years, Foster Care Initiatives has taught on early childhood development to more than 60 churches. The biggest change I've seen is men and women feeling compelled to share what they are learning with their friends, families, and co-workers. Churches have asked for further, more in-depth trainings on child development. Once a member of our community feels engaged with the brain development of young children, many become zealous to spread the information.

Q: How do you suggest other people in your community get involved?

A: The church has a rich history of caring for the vulnerable because of our desire to love our community in all the ways Jesus loved others. Our local churches are great soil to soak up the newest research on early childhood development. Everyone plays a different role in taking up the mantle of ensuring our society places high value and worth on children. Doing something to affect the life of just one child is of immense value, because that child is valued immensely.